

Fantastic book – but let's reinforce that coffee table



Stephen McGinty

THESE are books which should come with a health warning. A little sticker illustrating back strain, or the crippling consequence of dropping the tome on one's toe. This week just such a book was levered on to my desk by fairies unknown, though ones with gym membership. Standing 15 inches tall and weighing a little less than a baby elephant is the latest publication from **Taschen**, whose new motto is "rich books for poor times". The German art-house publisher produces titles whose size, expanse and sheer beauty are enough to make an e-book short-circuit with shame. These are titles to dominate a room that demand endless days of idle flicking, not a title to be reduced to pixels.

Their motto is also apt. I don't know when I'll next manage a trip to Los Angeles, but, thanks to Taschen, I feel like I'm just back.

I love LA. If I had to choose a single city to spend every holiday until the day I die it would be the City of Angels. You can keep Manhattan and its claustrophobic concrete canyons, I'll take the west coast's sunny optimism over the east coast's angst any day. An early love affair with the movies and detective novels make our courtship inevitable, but frequent visits have seen boyish infatuation deepen into genuine love.

Favourite drive? Down Wilshire Boulevard to Ocean Drive, where a stone saint (Monica) keeps guard over the end of continental America and the Pacific Blue. Favourite drink? The Arnold Palmers at the Hotel Bel Air, where President Nixon wrote his memoirs and Marilyn swam in the nude. Favourite burger? The double cheese with fries at Johnny Rockets on 3rd Street Promenade. Favourite souvenir? The personalised stationery announcing "in residence: Stephen McGinty" from the Châteaux Marmont, where John Belushi OD'd and Howard Hughes spied on girls in the hotel pool.

Visiting *Los Angeles: Portrait of a City* (this is a book too big to just "read") has been like a combined mini-staycation and an erudite history degree. The 571 pages of black-and-white and colour photographs are magical, carrying you from the days when Sunset Boulevard was ploughed by a

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team of horses to the rising hotels and neon glitz of today. The pictures are like the movies they will become, such as *LA Confidential*.

The corruption of the LAPD is illustrated by a powerful portrait from 1927 of James "Two Gun" Davis, the chief of police, pointing one gun into the camera lens. Like Tony Blair, he was "tough on crime" but had little interest in the causes of crime, just his own unique solution. He would "hold court on gunmen in the Los Angeles streets; I want them brought in dead, not alive, and will reprimand any officer who shows the least mercy to a criminal." Chief Davis's "gun squad" executed hundreds of criminals. Then, on the other side of the fence, is a portrait of Meyer Cohen sitting bold on a chair behind a backdrop of headlines testifying to his Mafia power, such as "plot to bomb Cohen bared".

Then there is the striking Jayne Mansfield floating in a bikini on a Lilo amid a swimming pool filled with novelty bottles made in her curvacious image. There is plenty of testament to LA's worship of the automobile, such as the drive-in service at the Emmanuel Lutheran Church in North Hollywood in 1965, kerbside inoculations and, in perhaps the most absurd example of Californians' dependence on the automobile, a drive-through liquor store.

Yet, the saddest picture, one which exposes the darkness amid all that sunshine and fame, is a black-and-white still taken in 1962 at the Los Angeles County Morgue. The door of a body freezer is held open by the hand of an unseen man, revealing a white shroud, out of which peeps a left foot, on the big toe of which is tied a name-tag.

It's the last "portrait" of Marilyn Monroe.

Perhaps some cities should come with a health warning: LA may break your heart, but for me it remains a fatal attraction.

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